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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASUNCION 000187

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SUBJECT: PRESS ASSOCIATION GIVES LUGO GOOD MARKS

REF: ASUNCION 17

Classified By: Ambassador Liliana Ayalde for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (U) SUMMARY: The Inter-American Press Association (IAPA), which held its biannual meeting in Paraguay this month, was harshly critical of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, but Paraguay received good marks. As the IAPA director explained: "Whereas other governments in the region are systematically attacking journalists, President Lugo is committed to defending press freedom." The IAPA did criticize the GOP's efforts to install community radio stations and expressed concern with the GOP's overall communications or "propaganda" campaign. Lugo, who keynoted the event, expressed strong support for freedom of expression and reiterated his respect for the role of a free press in a democratic society: "It is better to have an adversarial but honest press that helps us correct our errors than a press that is our friend but hides our errors." END SUMMARY.

THE INTER-AMERICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION (IAPA) MEETING

2. (U) The Inter-American Press Association held its biannual meeting in Asuncion March 13) 16. The event was attended by 250 owners, editors and directors of media organizations across the region. The IAPA was established in 1942 to defend freedom of the press and expression. Over 1,300 newspapers and magazines are members with a combined circulation of 43 million readers. One of IAPA's projects is known as the Chapultepec Project. The Declaration of Chapultepec states that "no law or act of government may limit freedom of expression or press, whatever the medium." The president of IAPA, Enrique Santos Calderon, a Colombian writer, journalist and co-director of prominent Colombian daily El Tiempo, attended the conference and gave several media interviews. Santos expressed concern over Chavez's hostile actions against the media and highlighted the increasing violence against journalists committed by narcotics traffickers, especially in Mexico. Paraguay's leading daily, ABC Color, gave prominent and extensive coverage to the IAPA conference, which is not surprising since ABC owner, Aldo Zuccolillo, essentially hosted the meeting.

IAPA REPORT ON PRESS FREEDOM IN THE AMERICAS, VENEZUELA, ECUADOR, AND PARAGUAY

3. (U) IAPA reserved some of its harshest criticism for Hugo Chavez for his "gratuitous attacks on the press, for closing media organizations, and for discrimination in access to information." Cuba was also singled out for the "absolute repression of independent media and freedom of expression ... where 26 journalists remain in jail." Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Argentina were also noted

as having problems. (NOTE: Ecuadorian President Correa, in Paraguay on a state visit, March 23-24, used his first press opportunity to bash the IAPA as defenders of corporate media interests, not of press freedom, and as tools of the CIA. END NOTE). Mexico was underscored as the most dangerous country for journalists. The financial crisis and challenges posed by new technology were considered the gravest threats to journalists in the United States.

¶4. (U) Chavez foe and owner of Venezuela's Radio Caracas Television International (RCTV), Marcel Granier, attended the meeting. (NOTE: Venezuela did not renew RCTV's broadcasting license in 2007 in a move widely seen as politically motivated and harshly criticized by the international community. RCTV had been on the air since 1953. END NOTE). Granier expressed concern over what he saw as a dangerous game Lugo was playing with Chavez. "I would be worried if as a Paraguayan my government was so close to a government with a motto of 'fatherland, socialism or death.'" He also noted the dangers journalists often face throughout Latin America. According to the IAPA, 332 journalists have been killed in the Americas since 1987, including four Paraguayans, the most prominent being the former director of Radio Mburucuya, Santiago Leguizamon, killed in 1991. The case is still unsolved. END NOTE).

PARAGUAY

¶5. (U) IAPA director Santos concluded the conference with an interview in which he said: "We are encouraged by freedom of the press in Paraguay. Whereas other governments in the region are systematically attacking journalists, Lugo is committed to defending press freedom." Paraguay did not,

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however, escape completely unscathed. In a report penned by IAPA regional vice president Alejandro Dominguez (also director of Paraguayan business daily La Nacion), IAPA expressed concern over Lugo's "Communications Plan for Development" which includes a GOP newspaper, plans to create 700 community radio stations and seed them with newly trained journalists, and plans to start a government TV station (reftel). "The structure, financing, and vertical links to the state resemble a propaganda network and not a campaign for social development ... These radios also pose a threat to commercial radio." The report also noted the lack of judicial action on the Leguizamon case.

GOVERNMENT RESPONDS

¶6. (U) GOP communications director and former radio journalist Augusto Dos Santos reiterated to the attendees his intent to provide information, not propaganda. "The development of alternative communication should not be seen as a threat to private media enterprises ... What we are concerned about is the pollution of the radio spectrum with unlicensed radio stations that exist simply as the result of political favoritism." (NOTE: Dos Santos previously told PAO that Paraguay has some 1,000 community radio stations of which only about 200 are licensed. Most of these stations are affiliated with one political party or another (reftel) END NOTE). Dos Santos added: "We have no intention of pushing for any gag law or any type of censorship and we are satisfied with the conclusions of IAPA in which Paraguay was not included in the list of governments having problems with the press." As if to drive home the point, President Lugo signed the Chapultepec Declaration, explaining: "We have no intention of proposing any legislation regarding the press. There are neither people nor societies free without freedom of expression and free press." Lugo observed (without irony) that the third Chapultepec principle states that: "Authorities are legally obligated to put at the disposition of their citizens information generated by the public sector ... For this reason we have created the Secretary of Information and Communications for Development." Lugo also promised judicial action on the Leguizamon case.

LUGO ON CHAVEZ

¶7. (U) During a private meeting with some 15 prominent IAPA members, Lugo joked about the tough Paraguayan press. "I remember a headline around August 20, five days after I took office, complaining that I had not kept my promises.⁸ In response to a question about his philosophy and if he was a Marxist/Chavista," Lugo said: "We are not married to any ideology but are simply looking for solutions. We need to learn from everybody. We are not following any model; Paraguay is different and must follow its own path. But to change a society is a long process."

COMMENT

¶8. (C) As he has in the past, President Lugo said all the right things about freedom of the press. And Paraguay received good marks from the IAPA, especially when compared to other countries in the region. Unlike the IAPA, we are not overly concerned with the GOP's communication plans, although we will keep watching. More importantly, so will the powerful and frequently adversarial media enterprises in Paraguay that will certainly hold the President to his word. We are more concerned about an often incoherent government that increasingly appears to be adrift. In response to the latest public relations fiasco involving sesame farmers, Lugo has created a special group of advisors which includes Dos Santos. Dos Santos, in discussions with PAO, has expressed interest in possible technical assistance we could provide on strategic communications and message management. This kind of assistance is something the GOP could clearly use. END COMMENT.

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AYALDE